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Follow-up actions to the recommendations of the International Conference on Population and Development

Statement submitted by Ipas, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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* E/CN.9/2004/1.

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Ipas is an international organization whose mission is to increase women's ability to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights and to reduce deaths and injuries from unsafe abortion. Over the past decade, Ipas has worked with national and international partners in countries around the world to advance the vision articulated in the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), with special attention to its abortion-related recommendations. We welcome the opportunity to express our views on the review and appraisal of progress made in achieving ICPD goals and objectives.

At the ICPD, governments recognized the health impact of unsafe abortion as a "major public health concern," and agreed that "in circumstances where abortion is not against the law, it should be safe." (PoA, para. 8.25) In the vast majority of countries who signed on to the ICPD PoA, abortion is legal under certain circumstances.

The report of the Secretary-General on the review and appraisal of the progress made in achieving the goals and objectives of the Programme of Action of the ICPD identifies progress and challenges in key areas including health and mortality. Unsafe abortion is mentioned in two key areas of this document – in relation to adolescent health (p 32) and maternal health (p 39).

The Secretary-General's report states that "complications related to pregnancy and childbirth are among the leading causes of mortality for women of reproductive age in many parts of the developing world," and that "the immediate cause of pregnancy-related complications, ill health and death is inadequate care of the mother during pregnancy and delivery." It might also be noted that out of the 529,000 women who die every year of pregnancy, at least 13% die from unsafe abortions; this figure is much higher in some countries, especially in Africa. In addition, unsafe abortions, and the deaths and injuries they cause, are almost entirely preventable. When performed by a skilled provider under safe conditions and with modern methods, the World Health Organization has affirmed that abortion is one of the safest surgical procedures.[i]

Fortunately, many members of the international community -- governments, civil society organizations, and international agencies -- have worked together to lay the foundation for more rapid progress in reducing the deaths and injuries caused by unsafe abortion. Contraceptive use has increased significantly in many countries, helping to prevent unintended pregnancies. Emergency contraception is slowly becoming more widely accessible. Through the introduction of postabortion care programs, treatment of abortion complications has improved, saving many women's lives. A number of countries have expanded legal indications for abortion, while technologies for induced abortions have also improved. And the World Health Organization has recently released guidance for health systems on the provision of care for women who need induced abortions, identifying requirements for high quality services by trained providers working at the community level.[ii]

However, more needs to be done. Every year, close to 20 million women resort to unsafe abortions; 68,000 of them die and 5 million more are temporarily or permanently disabled. In the past decade alone, well over half a million women have died from the complications of unsafe abortions. Furthermore, in a clear violation of their rights to health and life, well over 100 million women alive today will experience the risks and trauma of an unsafe abortion during their lives unless they are enabled to avoid unwanted pregnancies. Many of these women are living in poverty or suffering from serious health conditions such as HIV/AIDS or malaria. Many are adolescents, survivors of sexual violence, refugees or displaced persons living in situations characterized by violence and lack of access to adequate health services.

Unless all concerned governments and civil society actors take concerted action, this situation is likely to worsen, as half of the world's population is under the age of 25 and unsafe abortion is particularly devastating to young women. In observance of the 37th session of the Commission on Population and Development, we therefore call on all members of the international community to join together in pursuing an active dialogue on abortion as a critical issue in women's reproductive health and rights and in supporting the actions required to translate the ICPD mandate into reality. At a minimum, these include.

- Reaffirming governments' commitments to the ICPD Programme of Action;

- Addressing the Fifth Millennium Development Goal of reducing maternal mortality by three-quarters between 1990-2015, by taking steps to ensure that women do not have to risk their lives when faced with an unwanted pregnancy; and

- Allocating resources to ensure that women around the world, regardless of income, ethnicity or religious affiliation, have access to voluntary, comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education and services, including access to safe abortion care.

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[i] *Safe Abortion: Technical and Policy Guidance for Health Systems,* WHO: 2003, p. 14.

[ii] Ibid. The WHO guidance is intended to help countries in implementing ICPD + 5 recommendations 63iii, which states: "In recognizing and implementing the above, and in circumstances where abortion is not against the law, health systems should train and equip health-service providers and should take other measures to ensure that such abortion is safe and accessible. Additional measures should be taken to safeguard women's health." *Key future actions for implementation of the Programme of Action of the ICPD, Paragraph 63(iii) – special session of the UN general assembly*